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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7528
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5230
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1912
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000460

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY, E BURKE AND F REID

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: KARUNA GROUP EMBOLDENED IN THE EAST

REF: A) COLOMBO 439 B) COLOMBO 294 C) COLOMBO 59 D)
06 COLOMBO 2095 E) 06 COLOMBO 1911 F) 06
COLOMBO 1887 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: As ref A reported, Karuna, leader of a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) breakaway faction in the East, is engaging in serious human rights violations and criminal activities, often under the protection of the Sri Lanka security forces. This cable provides additional details of the Karuna group's criminal enterprises as well as background in which Karuna's actions, and the government's support of Karuna, can be understood. Under the protection of the Sri Lanka military, Karuna has emerged as a destructive force capable of influencing many aspects of daily Tamil life in the East, but there is evidence that Karuna's support among his base is eroding as he aligns himself closer to the GSL. End Summary.

Karuna Emerges from Hiding

12. (C) Karuna had all but disappeared from the public eye following a series of military reverses at the hands of the Tigers after his 2004 split from the LTTE. We know that he was living for some time in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, but the date of his return to Sri Lanka is not clear. However, it is apparent that he has ended his Indian exile and has probably been living and working at his main camp in Welikanda (Polonnaruwa District), under the protection of the Sri Lankan security forces. Karuna's pictures appeared in several newspapers during the first week in March. One photo shows Karuna addressing a group of cadres with a Sri Lankan flag on a tall flagpole in the background, which is probably the flag of the Sri Lankan army base next to his Welikanda camp. Embassy contacts tell POL FSN that the Welikanda camp is the primary destination for abduction and extortion victims, as well as a transfer and training point for forced recruits to his paramilitary cadres, including many children.

13. (C) In early March, Karuna made a rare appearance at the graduation ceremony of the latest batch of TMVP militia cadres. In his address to the recruits, he said that the TMVP believes in the rule of law, democracy and pluralism, and supports living together on an basis of equality with the majority Sinhalese and the minority Muslim communities. He said it is the TMVP's duty to respect Sri Lanka's constitution, president, and government. He thanked the GSL, specifically President Rajapaksa and Army Commander Fonseka, for liberating Vakarai from the "ruthless Tigers." He described the military wing of the TMVP as a self-defense force to protect the TMVP from the LTTE. He noted that he has personally told Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, that the TMVP is not involved in the abduction and recruitment of underage children. He added that when he and his cadres left the LTTE in March 2004, they decided to enter mainstream politics and gave up the utopian idea of a separate Tamil state.

A "Mainstream" Political Party?

14. (C) As reported ref E, the TMVP, in an effort to be seen as a legitimate political party, has opened political offices throughout the East. Since ref E, Embassy has learned that the number of Karuna offices is rapidly expanding, including offices in Trincomalee, Kalmunai, Karativu, Chenkaladdy, Valachchenai, Kalawanchikudy, Batticaloa, Morakottanchenai, Thirukovil, Akkaraipattue, Pottuvil, Welikanda and Karapola. There are two offices in Colombo. For technical reasons -

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there is no national election in the offing - the TMVP is not yet registered officially as a political party, and the Commissioner of Elections does not yet recognize the TMVP. However, Karuna announced on March 2 that the TMVP will contest the next elections island-wide. Most observers think he is seeking a predominant role in the politics of the East.

Hunger for Power Alienates Supporters

15. (C) Karuna's support may be dwindling in some corners. POL FSN has heard reports that many Karuna cadres are returning to the LTTE because they feel Karuna has been bought out by the GSL and has abandoned the cause of the Eastern Tamils. Many Eastern Tamils are disillusioned with him for not speaking out about their recent displacement and because Eastern Tamils have not received any humanitarian assistance from the Karuna cadres.

16. (C) Karuna has also reportedly distanced himself from Douglas Devananda and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), a previous source of support. Devananda was influential in convincing Karuna to leave the LTTE, and the two groups worked together when Karuna first began operating in Colombo. Now, however, Karuna appears to have overtaken his mentor Devananda in political significance, leading some observers to think there is an ongoing power struggle between the two anti-LTTE Tamil leaders.

Rampant Abductions and Extortion in Colombo and the East

17. (C) As outlined in ref A, reports of Karuna's involvement in abductions and extortion continue to accumulate. Many members of the Vavuniya Bar Association have been receiving phone calls from a man named Seelan, who identifies himself as a member of the Karuna group. He has demanded large sums of protection money and threatened to kill the lawyers if they did not pay. On February 28, the Bar Association lodged complaints with the High Court Judge and the District Judge, and they decided to boycott court proceedings until the authorities could give them security

guarantees. Security assurances were given by the Chief Justice in Vavuniya and courts resumed on March 5. District Judge of Vavuniya M. Elansheliyan has informed the Embassy of the extortion of many businessmen by Karuna members Seelan and Pushpan over the past year.

¶18. (C) Karuna cadres are suspected of being involved in the abduction of seven employees of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (an humanitarian and reconstruction agency linked to the LTTE) in Batticaloa District. A Karuna cadre reported the gang rape of one female employee who was then hacked to death. Four of the male employees were forced to dig their own graves before being shot.

¶19. (C) The Karuna group is also implicated in the abduction of wealthy Tamil Australian businessman S. Srikandarajah from Colombo, who disappeared on his way to work on July 20, 2006. His family was asked to pay a ransom of over Rs. 30 million (about \$300,000). The family traced the ransom call to a telephone number in Welikanda, and his vehicle was seen by business associates at the Karuna camp in Welikanda. Srikandarajah has not been released.

¶10. (C) As first reported Ref D, Vice-Chancellor of Eastern University S. Raveendranath was abducted from a Colombo High Security Zone on September 29, 2006. Since that initial report, his son-in-law told the Embassy that he has been informed that Raveendranath had been taken to the Welikanda camp and is no longer alive.

Western Embassies keep Karuna at arm's length

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¶11. (C) Embassy has had very limited, low-level contact with the TMVP offices in Colombo in the course of gathering information for our reporting. The Norwegian Embassy told us that they have also occasionally spoken to Karuna representatives at the political officer level as part of their principle of "talking to everyone." The UK High Commission has had no meetings with the Karuna group, but is considering initiating working-level contacts. The Germans had many, often unpleasant brushes with Karuna cadres, who raided a German Development Corporation (GTZ) warehouse in Batticaloa for building supplies (ref B). As a result, the German Development Counselor told us, Germany has suspended all its aid operations in the East, furloughing local employees.

¶12. (C) As reported ref A, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa told Ambassador on March 16 that the GSL was working to encourage Karuna to laydown his arms and transform his group into a purely political force. However, American NGOs told Ambassador during a roundtable he hosted on March 19 that the Karuna group remains actively engaged in military and criminal enterprises in Trincomalee and Ampara, in direct contradiction to Gothabaya's assertions that Karuna was no longer operating as a military force in areas the government has "cleared" of the LTTE.

¶13. (C) It is virtually impossible to operate in the Batticaloa area without attracting unwelcome attention from the Karuna group. An AID-funded project on workforce education in Batticaloa recently received an inquiry from Karuna cadres. Embassy suggested that the project directors speak to the Karuna representatives in the context of a meeting with other community leaders, but should release to them only such information as would be made available to the general public.

BIO NOTE

¶14. (C) Vinayamoorthy Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, was born in 1966 in Kiran, Batticaloa District, Eastern

Province. He left school and joined the LTTE in 1983. He served as a member of the Tiger Organization Security Intelligence Service in Chennai, India. He later became LTTE leader Prabhakaran's most trusted confidante and the LTTE's longest serving regional commander with the rank of Colonel. Karuna is married to Nira, also an LTTE member from Batticaloa District. His older brother, Reggie Amman, was military commander of Vakarai, but was killed in battle.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: As Karuna returns to public view and becomes emboldened to pursue political as well as military power, the government's denials of involvement with him became increasingly and obviously threadbare. The government's fall back position appears now to be, roughly, "We will help Karuna become a real political party after we finish expelling the Tigers from the East." While Karuna remains a key part of the GSL strategy for gaining and maintaining control of the East, we suspect both the government and Karuna himself may have miscalculated the degree to which Eastern Tamils will support Karuna as a leader. While the Karuna Group continues its illegal activities, the Embassy will maintain a policy of meeting TMVP representatives only at the working level outside the Embassy.
BLAKE